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Central Intelligence Agency

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Washington, D.C. 20505

## DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

14 February 1985

Tensions on the China-Vietnam Border: The Cambodian Factor

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SUMMARY

The uneven tempo of Chinese [redacted] along the Vietnamese border has caused ASEAN--and some Western observers--to question Beijing's commitment to opposing Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. The Thai in particular have complained about what they view as China's tardy and inadequate responses.

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[redacted]  
[redacted] Chinese have taken and continue to hold small pieces of Vietnamese territory.

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The problem is, in part, one of perception. The Chinese appear to have changed their tactics from intermittent, highly publicized assaults to more sustained, less visible military pressure, while observers are still looking for the reactive, showy actions of past years. We also believe Beijing's relations with Moscow and Washington now have a greater influence on Chinese action along the border than Vietnamese operations in Cambodia or China's normal concern about relations with ASEAN. If Beijing, however, believes that its relations with ASEAN would be seriously damaged, we would look for a larger ground assault near Malipo, wider

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] of East Asian Analysis. Information available as of 14 February 1985 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Defense Issues Branch, China Division, OEA, [redacted]

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pressure on the border, or perhaps even limited airstrikes. But Beijing is unlikely to exercise the costly option of a major "second lesson" unless Thailand's national security is threatened. [redacted]

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### Military Activity Heats Up

In sharp contrast to the 1982-83 Cambodian dry season when Beijing shelled the Vietnamese border heavily only at the end of major seasonal fighting in Cambodia, China has applied sustained military pressure against Vietnam throughout the past year.

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[redacted]

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Although clashes and shelling slowed around the turn of the year and a large number of troops were temporarily withdrawn to their home garrisons, Chinese combat engineer regiments continued to improve the roads leading to the occupied hilltops and an army-level structure was created near Malipo. [redacted]

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[redacted] There is a possibility, moreover, that the Chinese have added more troops than we have been able to account for. Chinese media reports suggest that Beijing has sent troops from seven of its 11 military regions--more than at any time since the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979--[redacted]

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### But Thailand Complains

The absence of a sharp response to Vietnam's largest Cambodian offensive in six years provoked criticism from Thai officials recently. The Thai believe that they have an understanding with Beijing that Chinese pressure would be increased along Vietnam's northern border during periods of Vietnamese attacks against the resistance, as well as an explicit agreement from Beijing to strike at Vietnam if Vietnamese troops enter Thai territory in force. Beginning in late December, Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi began to

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voice his unhappiness with China's apparent lack of forcefulness.

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### Beijing's Past Performance

The Chinese in any event are unlikely to gear their military activity solely to the situation in Cambodia. Beijing is certainly aware that even if it drastically expands the fighting, the benefit to the Cambodian resistance and the Thai would be minimal. Since the beginning of the conflict in 1979, the Chinese have adjusted the level of military activity in response to a variety of other concerns.

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Beijing's Concerns Today

We believe that broader strategic considerations have similarly played a larger role than regional factors in Beijing's recent calculations, just as they did last April. In April, the Chinese wanted to sent a signal to Moscow that they could not be intimidated from putting military pressure on Vietnam. They also wanted to underscore their strategic value in the region to the United States. [redacted]

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Having subsequently improved their security relationship with the United States, we believe the Chinese believed themselves to be in a better position by December to take a few small steps forward with the USSR, confident that the Soviets would not misinterpret the gesture as weakness. As a consequence, Beijing did not want an upsurge in fighting on the border to jeopardize the visit of Soviet First Deputy Premier Arkhipov a second time. Nor did they want to upset Moscow by launching new attacks on Vietnam immediately after Arkhipov's departure. [redacted]

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Beijing undoubtedly hoped to use the visit in part to feed Vietnamese suspicions of Sino-Soviet collusion. By the same token, the Chinese probably wanted to remind skeptics in Washington that China still maintains some maneuvering room within the triangle, and that its "independent foreign policy" is not just rhetoric. [redacted]

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The Price Beijing Pays

By adhering to a timetable of its own in applying military pressure to Vietnam, China has placed some strain on its relations with ASEAN, particularly Thailand. Thai officials who favor a strong relationship with Beijing ran the risk of political embarrassment at the tardy Chinese response to this year's Vietnamese campaign against the non-Communist resistance camps. Those circles in ASEAN that suspect that China will fight only to protect the Communist Democratic Kampuchea guerrillas have new grist for their mills the longer China delays what they believe should be stronger military action. [redacted]

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Although Hanoi is aware of current Chinese military activity along the border-- [redacted]

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[redacted] it must also be picking up the grumbling of the Cambodian resistance leaders who believe China should be doing more. This could embolden Hanoi in believing it ultimately will divide and wear down the backers of the resistance coalition. [redacted]

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If the Chinese fail to make a conspicuous demonstration of force against Vietnam, observers may suspect that the standdown in criticism of the Soviets at the time of the Arkhipov visit, plus the moderate tone emanating from Hanoi about the prospects for a political settlement in Indochina mean the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Soviets are approaching an understanding. We believe the Chinese would not want such a perception to go very far for fear of undermining their relationship with the United States and ASEAN and thus encouraging Vietnam. [redacted]

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### What's Next

Given that tensions along the Vietnamese border affect major facets of Chinese international relations, the Chinese will weigh these numerous factors before initiating any major new assaults on the Vietnamese. They may be willing to risk ASEAN ire if they believe their wider objectives can be served by restraint. Given China's determination over the long term to wear Vietnam down and to drive a wedge between Hanoi and Moscow, there is no question that pressure on Vietnam will continue, but its form and intensity will be molded by strategic considerations beyond the Cambodian context. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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At the least, we expect the Chinese to continue maneuvering ground, naval, and air forces to keep the Vietnamese off balance, and to keep up the shelling, border incursions, and seizure of small pieces of Vietnamese territory. If Beijing believes that its relations with ASEAN would be seriously damaged by the absence of stronger military action in the face of further Vietnamese pressure on Cambodian resistance bases, we would look for a larger ground assault, pressure along a wider salient of the border, or perhaps even limited airstrikes. However, Beijing will weigh all factors before it initiates major action and China is unlikely to exercise the costly option of a "second lesson" unless Thailand's national security is threatened. [redacted]

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